

# **PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION**

SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS IN SEPTEMBER 2020



## **EMMETT TILL AND MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY HOUSE** **6427 SOUTH ST. LAWRENCE AVENUE**



**CITY OF CHICAGO**  
**Lori E. Lightfoot, Mayor**

**Department of Planning and Development**  
**Maurice D. Cox, Commissioner**

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.*

*The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.*

*This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.*

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# **EMMETT TILL AND MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY HOUSE**

**6427 SOUTH ST. LAWRENCE AVENUE**

**BUILT: 1895**

**ARCHITECT: UNKNOWN**

## **Introduction**

The Civil Rights movement has been at work to combat slavery, discrimination, and segregation that have plagued American history for centuries. From abolitionists to the Civil War. From the Pullman Porters organizing under A. Philip Randolph in the 1920s to the Freedom Riders of the early 1960s. Then there are the martyrs who open the eyes of the nation to the atrocities of racism, segregation, and an unequal America. In 2020, it is George Floyd and far too many others. In 1955, it was Emmett Till. Emmett Till's murder on August 28, 1955, when he was just 14 years old, put a face to the victims of segregation and a visualization of how horrific racism and white supremacy are. After Emmett's murder, his mother Mamie Till-Mobley, began a life-long commitment to sharing his story and advocating for equity and justice.

The West Woodlawn neighborhood where Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley lived at the time of his death is rich with Great Migration history and stories of community. West Woodlawn is part of the Woodlawn Community Area on Chicago's South Side. The modest 2-flat at 6427 S. St. Lawrence was home to Emmett in the last years of his short life.

Emmett's young life was taken in August 1955, and 65 years later the fight continues for justice and equity for all Americans. In 2020, there has still been no justice for Emmett Till. The home at 6427 S. St. Lawrence Avenue that Emmett Till shared with his mother is an important reminder of Chicago's connection to the South and the Civil Rights movement that continues today to seek justice for the Emmett Tills of this nation. The memory of Emmett Till, and the contributions of his mother Mamie Till-Mobley since his death, are essential to telling the story of equity and justice in America.

## **The Murder That Shocked the World**

The torture and lynching of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi on August 28, 1955 set afire the movement to advance Civil Rights in America. His mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, dedicated her life to the Civil Rights movement, keeping Emmett's story alive to remind people of the horrors of segregation and racism. Their home at 6427 S. St. Lawrence in West Woodlawn is a direct connection to that legacy.

On August 20, 1955, Emmett Till boarded the 8:01 a.m. City of New Orleans train at the Illinois Central station at 63<sup>rd</sup> and Woodlawn with his great Uncle Moses Wright and his cousin

Wheeler Parker, Jr. headed for Mississippi. He was to spend two weeks there. They would spend mornings helping their uncle pick cotton on the 40 acres of land he sharecropped under Grover Frederick, freeing up the afternoons (when it was too hot to pick cotton) and evenings for family and especially cousin time.

Wheeler Parker, Jr. recalled: “We had so much fun. . . just good fun with nothing. We went swimming, telling a lot of jokes.”

During that visit, Emmett was kidnapped and then murdered by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam (and others), for allegedly whistling at Roy Bryant’s wife Carolyn at the Bryant Grocery Store in Money, Mississippi, a small town in the Mississippi Delta.

On August 28, 1955, around 2:30 a.m., Bryant and Milam showed up armed at Moses Wright’s home, and took Emmett from the home. The search for him continued three days until his body emerged from the Tallahatchie River. Despite their attempt at sinking Emmett’s body by wrapping a heavy cotton gin around him with barbed wire, a young man fishing in the river discovered his remains three days later.

Back in Chicago, Mamie Till-Mobley and her extended family and friends were frantically doing all they could to find her son. She immediately reached out to *The Chicago Defender*, the black-owned newspaper that was circulated around the country. A reporter from *The Chicago Defender*, Mattie Smith Colin, stayed with Mamie during the three days until her son was found. The Chicago-based *The Chicago Defender* and *Jet* magazine (owned by John H. Johnson) were the first major publications to publish pictures of Emmett’s tortured body. *Jet* photographer David Jackson took the image of Emmett Till in his coffin that was circulated worldwide. Mamie encouraged them to do so. Other black-owned papers quickly followed suit.

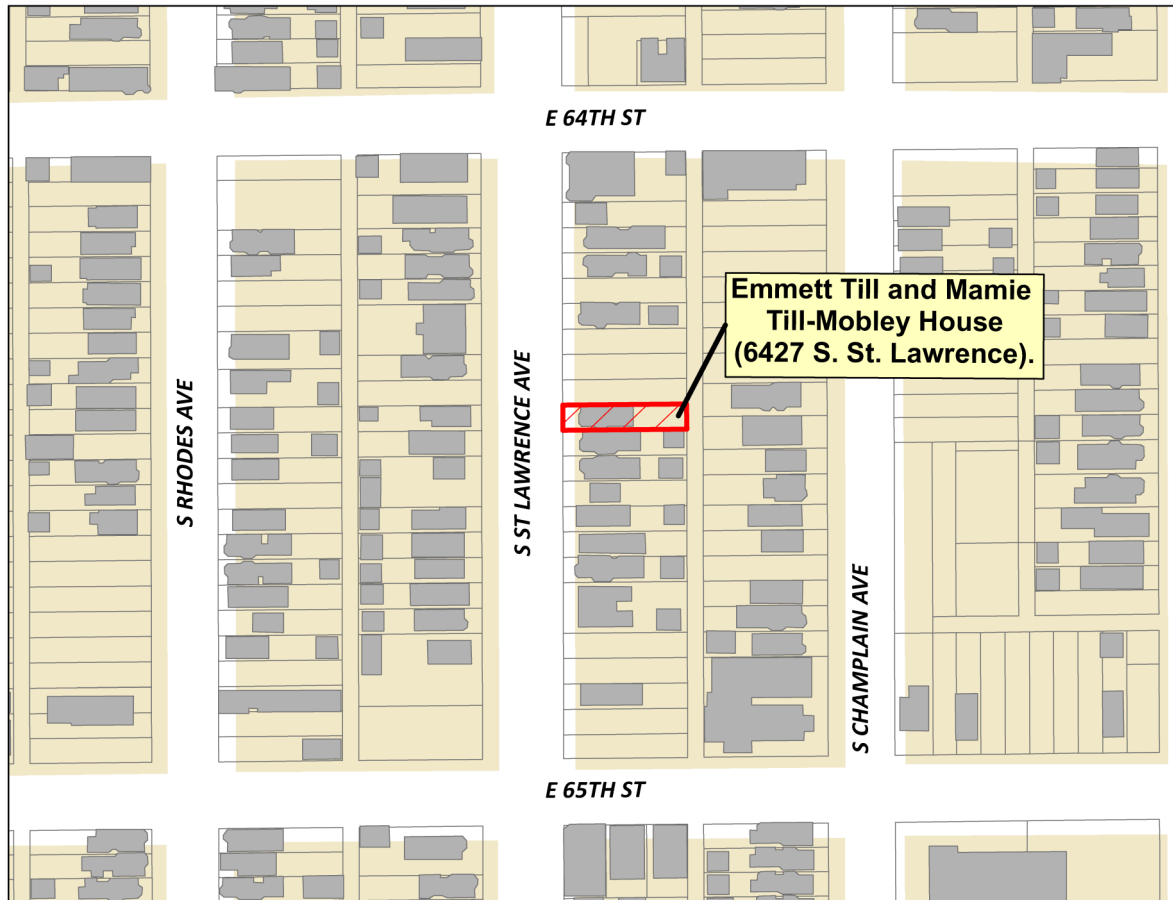
Moses Wright’s family quickly left for Chicago after Emmett’s body was found, but he stayed behind to finish up his cotton harvest and stand as a witness in the murder trial. There were so many threats to his life, he either stayed with friends or hid in the woods with a rifle most nights.

During the trial, Moses Wright stood bravely on the witness stand and pointed to Bryant and Milam, identifying them as the men who abducted his nephew. Later, 18-year-old Willie Reed took the stand and testified that he saw Bryant and Milam bring a black man into a shed and later heard brutal beating sounds. He also testified to seeing Milam come out with a gun strapped to his belt. Both Wright and Reed quickly left Mississippi when the trial ended, headed to Chicago.

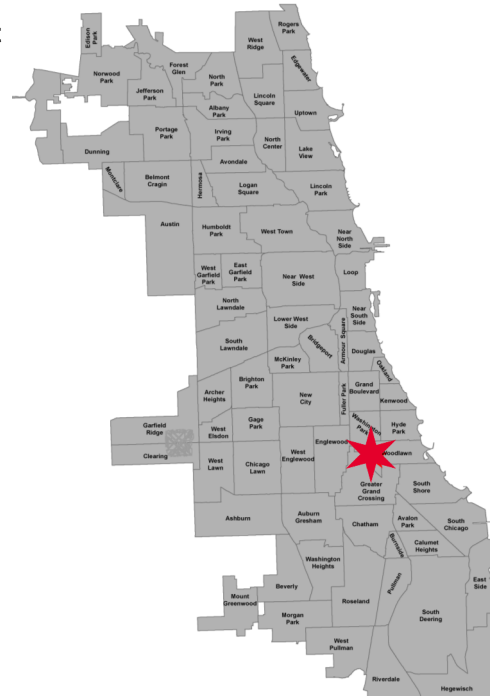
There was no justice for Emmett Till. Despite being charged with murder, a sentence punishable by death, Bryant and Milam were found not guilty by a jury of 12 white men. They would later be released from charges of kidnapping as well, a crime they admitted to prior to the murder trial.

Within a few months, Bryant and Milam would get paid \$4,000 to share their murder confession story published in *Look* magazine. *Look* placed ads in newspapers across the country promoting this issue of the magazine to boost sales. In 2017, Carolyn Bryant admitted to author Timothy B. Tyson that Emmett Till had done nothing in her store that warranted what her husband and

## Building Location Map



The Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley House is located at 6427 South St. Lawrence Avenue in the Woodlawn Community Area on Chicago's South Side.



brother-in-law did to him.

Mamie Till-Mobley would spend the rest of her life advocating for equal rights and telling the tragic story of Emmett Till's murder. Civil Rights leaders like Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and U.S. Representative John Lewis would speak of the profound impact Emmett's death had on their lives and important work.

The FBI re-opened an investigation of the murder in 2005, but no new charges were filed. Emmett Till's remains were exhumed to confirm DNA results that it was his body (in the 1955 trial, defense attorneys argued it was not Emmett Till who was pulled from the Tallahatchie River). After Carolyn Bryant's admission that she lied during the trial about Emmett Till's actions while in her store, the FBI re-opened the investigation a second time in 2017. That case is still open, and the results have been anticipated for a good part of 2020.

## **Building History**

The two-story, brick, two-flat building was built in 1895.

Alma Carthan purchased the two-flat at 6427 S. St. Lawrence Avenue in November 1951. Mamie and Emmett Till moved into the three-bedroom apartment on the second floor, and an uncle and aunt lived in the first-floor apartment. Ollie Gordon – Emmett's cousin – and her family migrated up north from Mississippi, and they lived briefly with Mamie and Emmett until the garden apartment unit was built out. Mamie Till-Mobley remained in the apartment until the early 1960s, when she had a brick ranch home built in the Chatham neighborhood at 8434 S. Wabash Avenue (extant). Alma Carthan eventually sold 6427 S. St. Lawrence home to a niece. Multiple owners have owned the property since.

In 1996, George Liggins transferred the property to Jimmie McCoy. Liggins was Mamie Till-Mobley's pastor at the time, and that quit claim deed was notarized by Mamie Till-Mobley.

Jimmie McCoy lost the property in foreclosure in 2000, and it was acquired by Donna Lillybridge. Ms. Lillybridge also lost the home in foreclosure in 2009, and since then it has transferred ownership four more times.

The exterior of the home has been modified only slightly since August 1955. The concrete front steps have been replaced with wooden steps and a small covered porch. The basement windows have been replaced by glass block.

## **West Woodlawn Community History**

The Chicago neighborhood of West Woodlawn is an oblong square mile located immediately west of Woodlawn, bounded by Cottage Grove Avenue on the east and Martin Luther King Jr Drive on the west; Washington Park and 63<sup>rd</sup> Street to the North, and 69<sup>th</sup> Street and the diagonal South Chicago Avenue on the south.

Woodlawn proper first boomed as a residential neighborhood with a commercial and entertainment area on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street during the World's Fair of 1893, the World's Columbian Exhibition. By 1920, white residents of Woodlawn, like those in many other neighborhoods had established residential restrictive covenants in an attempt to keep out Black residents. While Woodlawn would remain a majority white neighborhood into the 1950s, Black residents arrived in West Woodlawn in significant numbers much earlier, between 1914 and 1940.

During the Great Migration, the rural descendants of enslaved Africans in the American South fled increased violence at the end of southern Reconstruction in 1877 and the establishment of Jim Crow laws in the 1920s to northern cities. An additional motivation for the Great Migration was the decimation of Southern cotton crops by the Boll Weevil, reducing already limited opportunity for employment for Black workers. For many, the journey to the North held the promise of a more equitable society and more economic opportunity. Chicago was a destination for the Great Migration both because it was an industrial hub and because it was the center of networks, such as the Black newspaper *The Chicago Defender* where jobs and housing were advertised and the Pullman Porters, who distributed copies of the *Defender* to southern Blacks on Pullman train cars. Between 1916 and 1918, 50,000 people migrated to Chicago, doubling the city's Black population.

Both of these promises proved elusive. In Chicago as elsewhere, expansion of the Black population into white majority neighborhoods was restricted by the legal system, white violence, and even physical infrastructure. In 1919, riots were touched off by white bathers killing a Black teenager who had drifted onto the wrong side of the beach. 38 Black Chicagoans died and 300 were wounded during five days of street fighting and property destruction. In the same year, 1,200 white residents of Washington Park protested against Black residents moving to their neighborhood, and in favor of restrictive covenants and other legal restrictions that made it impossible for Black Chicagoans to acquire mortgages or insurance in white neighborhoods. Cumulatively, these and other forms of discrimination had the effect of concentrating most Black Chicagoans in limited, segregated neighborhoods such as Bronzeville on the city's South Side, also referred to as the "Black Belt."

Conditions in the Black Belt were overcrowded and in places dilapidated. Residents paid high rents for small or subdivided units the absentee landlords did not look after. Residents faced poverty, crime, and unemployment in addition to both structural and individual racism that denied full and complete participation in society. Despite this, the Black Belt and Chicago's South Side would become a center of Black art, culture, and society, helping to define the community's identity throughout the nation and world.

West Woodlawn offered Black Chicagoans one of the only alternatives to conditions of overcrowding and squalor in the Black Belt. Housing types in the neighborhood included bungalows and two- and three-story houses with open spaces where residents could congregate. Many families that owned a home rented a unit within it, allowing for supplemental income and increasing density moderately. At its peak, from 1940-1950, West Woodlawn was home to 12,000-14,000 Black residents. By comparison the city's total Black population was 240,000 in 1930 and 492,000 in 1950.



West Woodlawn residents over time have included a litany of notable and influential figures in African American life, as well as middle-class Black professionals: Lorraine Hansberry, noted *A Raisin in the Sun* playwright; Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and Illinois Poet Laureate; Charles V. Hamilton, political scientist, educator, and co-author with Stokely Carmichael of *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*; William Cousins Jr., Circuit Court Judge and Alderman of Chicago's Eighth Ward; and J. Ernest Wilkins, a mathematician who worked on the Manhattan Project; among other doctors, lawyers, artists, entertainers, and more.

Rev. Robert L. Polk and Cheryl Y. Greene collected the stories of West Woodlawn residents in their book, *Tight Little Island: Chicago's West Woodlawn Neighborhood, 1900-1950 in the words of its Inhabitants*. There Jean Overstreet Bell recalls the impact of the neighborhood's vernacular multi-unit housing on his and his sister Doris's childhood and social development. The description below is of his family's home at 6619 Evans Avenue:

*Our building was red brick. The vestibule, where you entered the building, had brass mailboxes and one bell buzzer for each of the two floors. Our landlord, Mr. Freeman, kept the building in good condition—everything working, except hot water! We had to heat it ourselves, sometimes.*

*As you came into our apartment there was a receiving entrance. If you stepped into the room on the right, you were in the parlor. Doris and I were only allowed in the parlor if we wanted to read a book, play the piano, or entertain family or my parents' friends. Toys were not allowed in the parlor.*

*If you continued down the hallway, the next door, on the right, was the dining room. You could also enter that room from the parlor, through a sliding wooden door. I remember eating in the dining room on special occasions such as Thanksgiving dinners. Otherwise, you could continue straight down the hall, passing the two bedrooms on the left, and enter the kitchen. Our kitchen was painted mint green. In those days, stoves had tall legs, which meant children could crawl underneath and 'hide' in plain sight...*

*Opening the back door in the kitchen, you could step down into the small enclosed back porch. This is where our icebox sat: blocks of frozen ice, brought by the iceman. The blocks of ice kept our food cold during the hot summer months. A side door led to the regular back porch where the stairs continued down to the back yard and basement. Down in the basement we used a tub-style washing machine to launder our clothes and an attached clothes-wringer to squeeze the water out of them. During the winter months we hung the clothes to dry in the basement, but during the summer months we hung them outside on the clotheslines.*

Many residents spoke of the tight-knit social fabric of the neighborhood in both social and spatial terms. Shirley Ann Lee Berry recounts that "the block we lived on was the epitome of what

I call *watchful caring*.” Berry goes on to describe how a multi-generational network of neighbors, both her family and “non-kin” kept watch over her and her sister on the 6600 block of Marquette Road where she was born and lived. She describes the practice of women “sitting out” and singing in the evenings; as well as catching lightening bugs, impromptu sports games, and more.

West Woodlawn’s comparatively stable, middle-class community was shocked by the brutal murder of 14-year-old resident Emmet Till while visiting relatives near Money, Mississippi, on August 28 1955. The murder would galvanize the community at time of immense change in Woodlawn, Chicago and the world.

Sharon Thomas Parrott describes the way in which the West Woodlawn community responded to the civil rights movement (1954-1968) mirrored that of the city of Chicago and the Nation:

*Growing up in Woodlawn helped me to make sense of the events of my day, such as the civil rights Movement. I can say that a significant part of how I view the world comes from the boundaries of the Woodlawn community.*

West Woodlawn’s future remains dynamic, while the forces that have changed it over the decades have themselves evolved. It remains a strong community with active community organizations, and it remains animated by the legacy of Emmet Till and the fight for justice that his murder galvanized.

### **Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley**

Emmett Louis Till was born on July 25, 1941 at Cook County Hospital. His mother was Mamie Till-Mobley and father Louis Till. His parents separated not long after his birth, and he never spent significant time with his father who was executed in Italy for “willful misconduct” while in the Army during World War II. Emmett contracted polio when he was 6 years old, but with intervention and therapy primarily administered by his mother and grandmother he recovered nearly completely save for a minor speech impediment and a slight limp.

Author Elliott J. Gorn’s 2018 book *Let the People See: The Story of Emmett Till* chronicles Emmett Till’s short life and the events that transpired after his murder. In it, Gorn writes of Emmett: “He talked about being a fireman or policeman someday, or maybe a Major League baseball player, manly, heroic jobs, and not unreasonable for an African American kid living near Chicago – Argo’s tiny police force had a black cop, Chicago long had hired black civil servants, and Emmett even got to watch Minnie Minosa, the White Sox star third-baseman, play ball in Comiskey Park, just a few miles east of Argo.” Emmett loved baseball, especially the Brooklyn Dodgers and pitcher Don Newcombe. The passage references Argo, which is what locals called the town of Summit because of the large factory that operated there.

Emmett loved his family. It was homesickness for his family that helped him convince his mother to let him move back to the Chicago area instead of in Detroit where he lived with Ma-



*Source: Mamie Till Mobley Memorial Foundation*



**Emmett Till and his cousin Wheeler Parker, Jr.;** *Source: Wheeler Parker Collection, Delta State University and Museum*



**Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley, December 1954;** *Source: Mamie Till Mobley Memorial Foundation*

**Emmett Till shown as an infant and maturing into a young man with his mother Mamie Till-Mobley. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old from Chicago when he left 6427 South St. Lawrence Avenue and traveled south in August 1955 to visit relatives near Money, Mississippi.**

mie and her then husband “Pink” Bradley. Emmett moved back to Summit (Argo), Illinois to be with his cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandmother. When Mamie Till-Mobley moved back to the area, she and Emmett settled in at the 6427 S. St. Lawrence building that was purchased by her mother Alma Carthan in November 1951. Emmett’s cousin Ollie Gordon and her family migrated north from Mississippi, and they lived first with Mamie and Emmett Till in the second floor unit at 6427 S. St. Lawrence. They then moved into the garden apartment when it was built out. An uncle and aunt lived in the first-floor apartment. Ollie Gordon remembers fondly how she, Emmett, and her siblings and cousins would move and play throughout the building.

According to Emmett’s cousin Wheeler Parker, Jr., Emmett loved jokes and would even pay people to tell him jokes. Emmett’s cousin Ollie Gordon recalled a time when Emmett cut apart a newspaper into money-sized pieces, stacked them together with a real dollar bill on top of them and pranked his mom – dropping the large wad before her proudly telling her it was some money he had made delivering groceries.

Ollie Gordon said Emmett was a great help around the house for his working mother. He would clean, prepare meals, even pay bills. He had a red wagon he would take around to the local A&P Grocery store and deliver people’s groceries to their house.

The *Emmett Till Memory Project* shared a reflection by Mamie Till-Mobley: “Emmett controlled 64th and St. Lawrence. For a three-block stretch, this was his land. He knew every old person. He did grocery errands. He did lawns. He (shoveled) snow. He made \$15 washing and painting a ladies’ hall, from the lower molding down to the floor.”

Emmett attended James McCosh Elementary School at 6543 S. Champlain. In 2005, it was renamed The Emmett Till Math & Science Academy. He was remembered as a well-behaved, average student.

Mamie Till-Mobley was born on November 23, 1921 near Webb, Mississippi. She migrated with her parents, Alma and Wiley Nash Carthan, from Mississippi to the Chicago area in 1924. They settled in (Summit) Argo, Illinois. Mamie lived in Argo until moving to Detroit. She moved back to Illinois in 1951, and she settled with Emmett into the apartment at 6427 S. St. Lawrence Avenue.

Alma Carthan was her own agent in the Great Migration. After settling in Summit, she welcomed countless friends and family migrating from the South. Her husband would help people secure work at the Argo Corn Products plant. Mamie would later recall: “Our house was the meetinghouse, the gathering place, the center of the community. It was the place where Mama had helped to found the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ, and where she recruited new church members with practically each new Mississippi migrant.”

### **Bringing Emmett Till Home**

Despite attempts by Mississippi law enforcement to bury Emmett hurriedly in Mississippi, Mamie Till-Mobley was able to have Emmett’s body returned to Chicago for a funeral and a burial.





The funeral and extended visitation for Emmett Till, held from September 3-6, 1955, at the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, was a pivotal event in the history of the civil-rights movement.

Crowd outside of Roberts Temple Church of God, located at 4021 South State Street, during the funeral of Emmett Till, September 3, 1955. Source: *Chicago Sun-Times*.



Mamie Till Mobley as Emmett Till's body arrives at the Illinois Central Railroad station. Source: *Chicago Sun-Times*.



Emmett Till's badly-mutilated body, seen in person by thousands of mourners during the funeral and visitation, and by millions more captured in a famous and graphic photograph published in *Jet* magazine, shocked and angered those who saw it and served as a catalyst for political and social change in America. David Jackson, 1955, Image published in *Jet* magazine

Chicago area Congressman William L. Dawson intervened on Mamie Till-Mobley's behalf to stop the Mississippi burial and return Emmett's remains to Chicago. The box containing his remains was shipped via railroad. Mamie Till-Mobley and her family, along with mobs of people and reporters, stood on the Twelfth Street Station (Illinois Central terminal) platform as it arrived early on September 2, 1955. Arrangements had been made with A.A. Rayner & Sons Funeral Home in Chicago to manage the funeral. At the time, the funeral home was located at 4141 S. Cottage Grove Avenue. Despite Mississippi lawmakers' orders that the box with Emmett's body not be opened, Mamie pressured A.A. Rayner, Jr. to open the box.

Tens of thousands of people lined up for hours for visitation arranged at both the Rayner funeral home and Roberts Temple. His casket was fitted with a glass cover. Media around the world covered the visitation and funeral.

Emmett Till was laid to rest in Burr Oak Cemetery at 4400 W. 127<sup>th</sup> Street in Alsip, Illinois on September 6, 1955.

### **Civil Rights, Equity and Justice Movement: Past, Present and Future**

Emmett Till's murder did not start the Civil Rights movement, but it elevated the cause internationally. Both people of color and white people rose to action upon learning the details of the brutal torture and murder of this young teenager. Along with significant incidents in the ensuing years, eventually the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* against separate but equal public school. Reactions to this ruling by white supremacist groups in the United States escalated fear of and violence and hostility toward black people. Schools then started desegregating slowly across the country. Reforms providing access to jobs, voting, education, and housing would follow, but the dream of equality still eludes America. While people of color are police officers, lawyers, jurors and judges, they disproportionately represent the prison population, are more likely to be killed by law enforcement officials, earn less money than their white counterparts, and have to work daily



**George E. C. Hayes, Thurgood Marshall, and James M. Nabrit congratulating each other on the the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* against separate but equal public schools, May 17, 1954. New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.**

through obstacles unimaginable to most white people.

In 1955 America, segregation, discrimination, and domination were words that best described how white Americans – especially in the South – interacted with people of color. Bathrooms, restaurants, movie theaters, buses, schools, and jobs were segregated. Access to quality education was unequal.

Author Michelle Alexander, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-blindness*, breaks it down here:

*For more than one hundred years, scholars have written about the illusory nature of the Emancipation Proclamation. President Abraham Lincoln issued a declaration purporting to free slaves held in Southern Confederate states, but not a single black slave was actually free to walk away from a master in those states as a result. A civil war had to be won first, hundreds of thousands of lives lost, and then – only then – were slaves across the South set free. Even that freedom proved illusory, though. As W.E.B. Du-Bois eloquently reminds us, former slaves had a “brief moment in the sun” before they were returned to status akin to slavery. Constitutional amendments guaranteeing African Americans “equal protection of the laws” and the right to vote proved as impotent as the Emancipation Proclamation once a white backlash against Reconstruction gained steam. Black people found themselves yet again powerless and related to convict leasing camps that were, in many ways, worse than slavery. Sunshine gave way to darkness, and the Jim Crow system of segregation emerged – a system that put black people nearly back where they began, in a subordinate racial caste.*

## **Emmett Till Murder Trial**

For the defense in the murder trial, this was a trial over the “Southern way of life.” In his closing argument at the trial, Defense Attorney John C. Whitten said: “There are people in the United States who want to destroy the custom and way of life of southern white people and southern black people.” Defenders of segregation saw any moves toward equality as a threat to their political and social dominance. In this Jim Crow south, black people were expected to bow their heads in the presence of whites, move from the sidewalks if a white person was walking toward them, say “Yes ma’am” and “No ma’am,” and most importantly for black men to avoid contact with white women.

The all-white, male jury took one hour to reach a not guilty verdict. One juror indicated they would have been done sooner, but they were encouraged to take their time to make it look like more deliberation took place. While most Civil Rights advocates were not surprised by the verdict, outrage over the murder around the world dramatically boosted Civil Rights efforts toward a just and equitable America.

Two days after the verdict in the murder trial, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Sleeping Car





**Willie Reed, along with Moses Wright, were bold and powerful witnesses for the prosecutors working to bring Emmett Till's murderers to justice. Both Reed and Wright would have to leave Mississippi for Chicago because of threats to their lives. *Chicago Tribune, September 23, 1955***



**Mamie Till-Mobley outside the courthouse during the murder trial. *Source: Wikipedia***



**Drawing of twelve jurors at the trial regarding the murder of Emmett Till, 1955, created by artist Franklin McMahon. The all-white, male jury took one hour to reach a not guilty verdict. *Chicago History Museum, ICHi-038478***



Porters, organized a protest rally in a Harlem church. Randolph, NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins and Mamie Till-Mobley spoke. This lynching in particular put a solid image of racism in all its horrors before the American people and the world. Author Elliot Gorn wrote: “Emmett Till’s murder made the system’s violence and injustice palpable.”

Mamie Till-Mobley reflected on her son’s legacy:

*When people saw what had happened to my son, men stood up who had never stood up before. People became vocal who had never vocalized before. Emmett’s death was the opening of the Civil Rights movement. He was the sacrificial lamb of the movement.”*

At a rally in Cleveland, Ohio on September 18, 1955, at the Antioch Baptist Church, Mamie Till-Mobley shared her story of how Emmett’s death turned her maternal grief into a call for action at the worldwide level:

*Two months ago, I had a nice six-room apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to Negroes in the South, I said, “That’s their business, not mine.” Now I know how wrong I was. The death of my son has shown me that what happen[s] to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of all of us. I am not bitter against anybody. But I will fight until the day I die to see that justice comes to all of the people who have been visited with a tragedy like mine.*

On October 1, 1955, Langston Hughes published a column in the *Chicago Defender* in memory of Emmett Till, including a poem titled “Mississippi—1955.”

*Oh what sorrow!  
Oh, what pity!  
Oh, what pain  
That tears and blood  
Should mix like rain  
And terror come again  
To Mississippi.*

*Come again?  
Where has terror been?  
On vacation? Up North?  
In some other section  
Of the nation,  
Lying low, unpublicized?  
Masked—with only  
Jaundiced eyes  
Showing through the mask?*

*Oh, what sorrow,  
Pity, pain,*

*That tears and blood  
Should mix like rain  
In Mississippi!  
And terror, fetid hot,  
Yet clammy cold  
Remain.*

Author Ethan Michaeli, in *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America*, wrote: “Nevertheless, the Emmett Till trial, those at *The Defender* realized, marked the end of white America’s innocence when it came to the race-related brutality in the South.”

Myrlie Evers, Civil Rights Leader Medgar Evers’ widow, said of Emmett Till’s death: “It played a very important role in letting all of America and perhaps the world know what was going on behind the cotton curtain.”

Just 100 days after Emmett Till’s murder, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus to a white man. In late November, Ms. Parks attended an NAACP rally at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery led by Dr. T.R.M. Howard. Dr. Howard was an integral part of the work to bring Emmett Till’s murderers to justice. Reflecting on that day she refused to give up her seat on the Montgomery city bus, Ms. Parks said, “I thought about Emmett Till, and I could not go back.” She would be found guilty of violating segregation laws in the South, laws that were being slowly dismantled in America but which were sacred ground for white supremacists looking to protect the “Southern way of life.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in September 1955 during a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, called Emmett Till’s murder “one of the most brutal and inhuman crimes of the twentieth century.” The March on Washington, at which Dr. King delivered his “I Have A Dream” speech, was held on August 28, 1963, 8 years to the day after Emmett Till was murdered.

Activist Joyce A. Ladner coined the term “The Emmett Till Generation,” young black activists whose commitment to the Civil Rights movement was ignited by the death of Emmett Till. “I can name you 10 SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) workers who saw that picture. . .in *Jet* Magazine who remember it as the key thing about their youth that was emblazoned in their minds.”

Poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” in 1960, honoring Emmett Till.

“I have a dream this afternoon that there will be a day that we will no longer face the atrocities that Emmett Till had to face or Medgar Evers had to face, that all men can live with dignity,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said on June 23, 1963 at a speech in Detroit.

In 2005, the investigation in the Emmett Till murder was reopened, but it ended with no additional charges. At that time, Emmett’s body was exhumed to conduct an autopsy.

“History is not always good,” said Rev. Wheeler Parker, Jr., “But you got to tell it like it is.”

<b>CLASS OF SERVICE</b> This is a fast message unless its deferred character is indicated by the proper symbol.	<b>WESTERN UNION</b> <b>TELEGRAM</b> 122 SEP 24 PM 12 54 1201 W. P. MARSHALL, PRESIDENT The filing time shown in the date line on domestic telegrams is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD.	<b>SYMBOLS</b> DL = Day Letter NL = Night Letter LT = International Letter Telegram nation
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NBH047 LONG PD=NEW YORK NY 24 1216P

A PHILIP RANDOLPH, BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS  
217 WEST 125 ST=

EXTEND WHOLEHEARTED SUPPORT YOUR INITIATIVE IN CALLING MASS MEETING PROTESTING LYNCHING OF EMMETT TILL. OUTRAGEOUS ACQUITTAL OF LYNCHERS IS GRIM WARNING THAT OUR PEOPLE MUST UNITE AS NEVER BEFORE IN MILITANT RESISTANCE TO TERROR AND OPPRESSION. IN THIS HOUR OF CRISIS I STAND AS ALWAYS WITH MY PEOPLE AND OFFER ALL THAT I HAVE MY HEART MY STRENGTH MY DEVOTION TO OUR COMMON CAUSE.

PAUL ROBESON 408 WEST 128TH STREET NEW YORK NY=

408 128

THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

Hollywood actor Paul Robeson expressing his support of lynching protests to A. Philip Randolph, September 24, 1955. Telegram. *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (087.00.00) Courtesy of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.*

**MASS MEETING**  
**PROTESTING**  
**EMMETT TILL**  
**LYNCHING AND TRIAL**  
**[IN MISSISSIPPI]**

**8:00 P. M., FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1955**

.. AT ..

**COMMUNITY A.M.E. CHURCH**  
JAMES AT LOGAN, S. E.

**SPEAKERS: MRS. MAMIE BRADLEY,**  
mother of murdered boy and  
other witnesses.

**HEAR THE FACTS AND REGISTER YOUR PROTEST!**

**AUSPICES: Grand Rapids N.A.A.C.P.**

A typical flyer circulated during Mamie Till-Mobley's speaking tour following Emmett Till's murder. *NAACP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (107.02.00) Courtesy of the NAACP*

In an opinion piece he asked be published after his death, the Honorable U.S. Representative John Lewis wrote of Emmett Till: “Emmett Till was my George Floyd. He was my Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor. He was 14 when he was killed, and I was only 15 years old at the time. I will never ever forget the moment when it became so clear that he could easily have been me. In those days, fear constrained us like an imaginary prison, and troubling thoughts of potential brutality committed for no understandable reason were the bars.”

“If it can further the cause of freedom, then I will say that he died a hero,” said Mamie Till-Mobley after her son’s death. Mamie Till-Mobley dedicated her life to the cause of racial justice and equity. “I’m not bitter,” she said. “I’m rather proud to be the mother of the boy who died to free our bodies. . . .Each of you own a little bit of Emmett.” When she saw the reactions of people at Emmett’s funeral, Mamie Till-Mobley said: “It was almost as if people were looking at their own child there rather than a stranger they didn’t know. It was at that time I knew Emmett was not just mine. He was a universal child.”

Mamie Till-Mobley was deliberate about having an open casket for Emmett to “let the people see what they did to my boy.” “If the world had not seen what had happened. . .the world needed this shock. . . .People were really able to see what happened to a youngster simply because of hate and race discrimination, it let us see the ugly monster that race hatred is.” Author James Baldwin noted: “It was myself in that coffin. It was my brothers in the coffin. . . .It was him, but it was all of us.”

Emmett’s funeral was held at Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ at 4021 S. State Street. Roberts Temple was designated a Chicago Landmark in 2005, because of its association with Emmett Till. Bishop Louis Ford recalled his sermon at the 1955 service: “God has brought him unto himself as a sacrificial lamb to wake the conscious of America of its racism, and from this many would be delivered and the move of righteousness will prevail.”

In a 1988 speech in Boston, Mamie Till-Mobley said: “We are not sitting in rocking chairs anymore. We are rocking boats now. In fact, we are going to turn them over.”

“When you look at the story of Emmett Till. . .and when you think about what’s happening in our country today with black men unarmed being shot, it’s like a new Emmett Till every week,” said Oprah Winfrey.

The Black Lives Matter movement has picked up the cause for justice and equity in America. BLM advocates protest and act to transform our nation’s long legacy of segregation and oppression to one of freedom and equality. As 2020 protests elevated after the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, Emmett Till’s name could be spotted on protest signs around the country. Like Trayvon, Michael, George, Breonna, Sandra, and Ahmaud, protestors continue to say Emmett Till’s name to be sure the movement toward equity keeps marching forward.

The Emmett Till Memory Project maintains a website and a smart phone app to keep the story alive and accurately detail the history. From their website:

*The Emmett Till Memory Project is your complete guide to the legacy of*

*Till's murder. The app takes users to the most important sites in the Mississippi Delta and beyond. At each site, the app provides expert-vetted narratives, access to relevant archival documents, and a collection of historic and contemporary photographs. The ETMP teaches users what happened at each site in 1955 and how the sites have been commemorated since 1955.*

*By telling Till's story from the perspective of each site, the app encourages users to wrestle with different versions of Till's story and think critically about how it has been passed on.*

*The ETMP is a collaborative production of the Emmett Till Memorial Commission of Tallahatchie County and scholars across the country: Dave Tell, Davis Houck, and Pablo Correa. It is funded by the General Research Fund at the University of Kansas and the Institute for Museum and Library Services.*

“We may be living 65 years after Till’s brutal death, but the historical lines that connect the ruthless indifference of some white Americans in 1955 to black lives and those same issues today might be a way for us to understand the moment our country finds itself in as we wander through a barrage of rubber bullets, tear gas, [and] pepper spray,” wrote W. Ralph Eubanks in an essay for Vanity Fair in June 2020.

## **Criteria for Designation**

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Section 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of Landmark designation for a building, structure, object, or district if the Commission determines that it meets two or more of the stated “Criteria for Designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of historic design integrity. The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley House be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

***Criteria 1: Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.***

- Emmett’s death and Mamie’s work were integral to the growth of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Emmett Till’s story is as important today as it was in 1955 to demonstrate the horrors of racism, segregation and white supremacy. Emmett Till’s 1955 murder ignited the Civil Rights movement throughout the United States.
- The death and funeral of Emmett Till in late August and early September 1955 was a major early catalytic events in the nationally-important Civil Rights Movement in 1954 and 1955, the others being the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in May 1954 and Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama, in Decem-

ber 1955.

- The funeral and extended visitation for Emmett Till, held from September 3-6, 1955, at the Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ in Chicago (a designated Chicago Landmark), was a pivotal event in the history of the civil-rights movement.
- Emmett Till's badly-mutilated body, seen in person by thousands of mourners during the funeral and visitation, and by millions more captured in a famous and graphic photograph published in Jet magazine, shocked and angered those who saw it and served as a catalyst for political and social change in America.

***Criteria 3: Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.***

- Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley lived in the home at 6427 S. St. Lawrence in the years leading up to Emmett's murder. Ms. Till-Mobley continued to live in the home until 1962 while she worked tirelessly to advance the Civil Rights agenda and honor the legacy of her only child Emmett.
- Ms. Till-Mobley traveled around the world to share her son's story, fighting for justice and equality.
- Ms. Till-Mobley devoted her life to the work of eradicating racism and improving the quality of life for people of color.
- Emmett Till's story is as important today as it was in 1955 to demonstrate the horrors of racism, segregation and white supremacy.

***Integrity Criteria:***

The exterior of the home has been modified only slightly since August 1955. The concrete front steps have been replaced with a wooden porch. The basement windows have been replaced by glass block. All of these changes are minor and reversible and they do not impair the building's ability to convey its significant association with Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley in particular, and the Civil Rights Movement in general.

**Significant Historical and Architectural Features**

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for Landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the significant historical and architectural features of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to

understand which elements are considered the most important to preserve the historic and architectural character of the proposed Landmark. Based on its evaluation of the Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley house, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.

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# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

## **CITY OF CHICAGO**

Lori E. Lightfoot, Mayor

### **Department of Planning and Development**

Maurice D. Cox, Commissioner

Kathleen Dickhut, Deputy Commissioner, First Deputy Commissioner's Office

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